

Reaction from Sweet Briar College to a Decision to
Integrate Sweet Briar
1961-1968

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I pledge. I pledge. I pledge. I pledge. I pledge.

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The nineteen sixties in America there was the on going issues of integration occurring on a daily basis. There were issue ranging from having the same drinking fountain and bathroom to not having to sit in a certain spot on a public bus and the integration of schools and golf clubs. In McCandless' essay, she states, "College traditions and rituals reinforced antebellum conceptions of womanhood."¹ The traditions of Sweet Briar and the southern society were going to be broken in order to allow African Americans into the college. Many people feared that by changing tradition the womanhood would change for the worst. The big question is the tension of integrating the African Americans and white Americans in the nineteen sixties.

In fact on February 15, 1961 Sweet Briar Students revolted against segregation. There was a group of girls from Sweet Briar that participated in picketing in front to Patterson's Drug Store. They were protesting the segregated lunch counter facilities. The school then had their eyes open to the fact that Sweet Briar need to re evaluate their admissions

¹ Amy Thompson McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges," 1993.

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process.² When the school found out about these students' actions Dorothy Jester, the dean of students called their parents to discuss the picketing. Ten of the students said they would not do it again, two said they are not sure and two said they would do it again.³ Was this the beginning of the road to integration? Yes it was the beginning of integration. Soon after this occurrences twenty-eight faculty members singed a petition to the board. The petition wanted the board to look at "what bearing the admission of Negroes would have on the future of these colleges, both academically and finically."⁴ This happened due to the students opening the eyes of the Sweet Briar community and the building blocks to integration.

Soon after the picketing and petition the issues of integration were going to be challenged. At Sweet Briar College during the years of 1963 to 1967 there was a court case that went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. In David Blights essay he states that "new generations" need to move "away from dwelling "morbidly and absorbingly upon the servile past," and toward an embrace of the urgent economic

² "SBC Students Picket," The Daily Advance (Wednesday February 15, 1961) VA.

³ Dorothy Jester to Von Buriran (18 February 1961) Administration: Lawsuit, Opinions: Alumnae.

⁴ Faculty of Sweet Briar College, petition to the Board, 7 March 1961, Administration: Lawsuit, opinions: Faculty.

and more "needs of the present."⁵ The case was about moving away from the past and into the present times, and therefore breaking the will of Indiana Fletcher Williams was going to have to be broken in order to integrate Sweet Briar and bring Sweet Briar up to date with the time period. The will stated that Sweet Briar College was for white women only. There was not only the tension of breaking the will but also of dealing with the alumnae who did not want to see Sweet Briar change and that in order to be tax exempt Sweet Briar had to admit African American students.

The best overview of the case comes from the book, the Sweet Briar College Case. This book "stated issues involved, the decisions which were made in regard to them and the manner in which the case moved thorough the courts during nearly three years of litigation." ⁶The book has information from the beginning of the case all the way to the final verdict of the United States Supreme Court on December 29, 1966.

⁵ Blight and Simpson, eds., "Quarrel Forgotten or a Revolution Remembered? *Reunion and Race 1875-1913*," *Union and Emancipation*, 1997. 161.

⁶ Sweet Briar College, publication book on court case, 1967, Archives of Sweet Briar, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar VA, 2.

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Many of the public's reactions were seen through newspaper clippings. One newspaper clipping was written regarding Maurice Blouin's, an alumnae's, letter to the paper about how she did not want Sweet Briar to become integrated. The article states that Mrs. Blouin got to come to Sweet Briar for free because she was an Amherst girl and she lived on campus with her family. The article backs up integration and explains that since she was given this chance for an education why should African Americans be denied the chance for a Sweet Briar education. The newspaper also states that the ruling was just a way to "see the decess Mrs. Williams' will interpreted in a different way."⁷ This article was a way to show how the alumnae were upset by the integration. This is related to McCandless' issue she brought up that stated "social life at Southern women's colleges was different because Southern life was different."⁸ In the South where the college was located, integration was a different transition than the north because the south did not want integration to exist and the social life was different.

⁷ Maurice Blouin, "Letter to Forum," Lynchburg Times, (June 6, 1966).

⁸ McCandless, p.93

The Sweet Briar court case also brought a lot of outside attention to the school. On July 20, 1967 in the LA Times there was a brief article on Sweet Briar College. It was a statement on how the College had broken the will of the founder to allow African American students to be admitted.⁹ This is important because it shows that the tension must have been high in the immediate area of Sweet Briar if word of the case had traveled all the way to California.

Since the outside community was obviously concerned with the integration of Sweet Briar one can only imagine that the immediate community was concerned as well. President Pannell decided that she would hold a tea with the faculty and board members to discuss the issues. However, when Dr. Pannell sent out the invitations and informed the faculty of this tea she did not mention that they were going to discuss the issues of integration. Was this a mistake? Well, whatever it was upset many faculty members. Richard C. Rowland, a professor at the college wrote and told Dr. Pannell that he was so sorry he missed the chance to discuss such an important issues and that this was a "social occasion

⁹ LA Times, (July 20, 1967) CL.

with not the slightest indication of the use which was to be made of it.¹⁰ There were many other faculty members concerned with the fact that they were left out and were very upset that their opinions were not expressed to the board.

The opinions of the alumnae came from personal letters to the president. I am the first to read these letters, which have never been published and have been, kept ~~in~~ away from anyone until now. Many of the letters came from alumnae ~~sent letters regarding the case as well.~~ Most of the letters were sent with the standpoint of being against integration. However, there were some letters, which were in favor of the integration and supported the school. While reading some letters written to President Pannell, there was a letter from Eppa Hunton IV. In this letter it was stated that the individual was very upset by the current backing of the school to integrate Sweet Briar. He expressed his concerns for the integration and stated that he wanted his name removed from the mailing list. He was no longer going to support a school that was going to break the will to become integrated. The purpose of

¹⁰ Richard C. Rowland to Ann Pannell (1 November 1963) Administration: Lawsuit, opinions: Faculty

this letter was to express the concerns Mr. Hunton had regarding the integration.¹¹ This is related to Lynn Gordon's piece. In his essay he states "women students and faculty banded together to meet challenges and address fears."¹² This was the focus of his essay, Mr. Hunton was very upset by the integration and stated his fears and opinion in his letter.

Then in August 1967, there was tension in the atmosphere of Sweet Briar and the community as well as alumnae, faculty and students. The campus was going to soon be filled with girls for another school year. However, on this day Mrs. Elizabeth Allison a graduate of Sweet Briar's class of 37' and as a parent she was a very distraught woman. She was so upset with the fact that Sweet Briar was going to be integrated and that she was not notified earlier that she decided to write a letter.

Mrs. Allison believed that allowing African American students into Sweet Briar would not be good for the school. Mrs. Allison was also upset because current students were not notified enough in advance

¹¹ Eppa Hunton IV to Ann Pannell (23 August 1967)

¹² Lynn Gordon, "Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era New Haven" 1990, 11.

so therefore her daughter did not have enough time to transfer. She did however express that her daughter did not wish to transfer because she was very satisfied with the college and her friends. Her daughter felt that the African American students would not interfere with her education. Mrs. Allison's daughter took a somewhat different stand than her mother.

She wrote her letter to the president of the college Dr. Ann Pannell, with the intention of making a stand and to express her concerns for the college's well being. Dr. Ann Pannell then wrote back to Mrs. Allison and expressed her condolences for the feeling that she had expressed in the letter. Dr. Pannell let her know that this decision to integrate Sweet Briar was a decision made with the best interest of the school in mind. This letter was just one of many sent to Dr. Pannell during this time of change for Sweet Briar College.¹³ This letter is significant because it shows conflicting opinions between an alumna, the mother and a student, her daughter.

Another alumnae
~~This letter~~ from Mary Eunice Armstrong shows alumnae not comfortable with integration and the

¹³ Elizabeth C. Williams Allison to Ann Pannell (5 September, 1966).

change of tradition. She wrote the letter from her home in Huntington, West Virginia. It was written on December 12, 1963. This was at the beginning of the integration case, which Sweet Briar was involved in. The issue of integration was causing a disturbance in life at Sweet Briar. Therefore, Sweet Briar was going to be integrated and, Mary Armstrong was expressing her opinions on the integration issues. Mrs. Armstrong was writing the letter to show her concerns for the college's future. Mary Armstrong was very distraught and upset that the college was going to be integrated. She gives three reasons why it should not be integrated. First she states that civil rights groups are a minority in society and no good. She thinks they cause problems in churches as well as social aspects of life. Second, Mrs. Armstrong states that "Negro" girls should go to school in the north where they will be accepted and wanted. Last she states that the tradition should not be changed and when the atmosphere is changed to all African American students into the college, the traditions will change. Mary Armstrong expressed her feelings and allowed the

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college to see that there were some very upset alumnae.¹⁴

The integration case was important to the development of the Sweet Briar Community. There were many people in favor of the integration students and faculty but there were also many individuals against integration. The alumnae were extremely upset by the issue that the tradition of Sweet Briar was going to be changed. From 1961 to 1968 the tension found in letters from alumnae became more heated as time passed. However, soon after the case was decided the letters stopped. The tension had been broken and the alumnae realized there was nothing they could do, they had lost their battle. The tension remained around the United States dealing with integration but soon everything was integrated, including the Sweet Briar Community.

¹⁴ Mary Eunice Armstrong, to Dr. Ann Pannell (12 December 1963) Alumnae letters

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Works Cited

Administration: Lawsuit Opinions: Alumnae. Archives of Sweet Briar, sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

This folder is located on the rolling cart on the left side of the Fletcher archives. This file contains various letter from Alumnae concerning the integration and then copies of the letters sent back to the alumnae by the president.

Administration: Lawsuit Opinions: Faculty. Archives of Sweet Briar, sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

This folder is located on the rolling cart on the left side of the Fletcher archives. The file contains the opinions on integration from the faculty of Sweet Briar College. This file has letters as well as petitions.

Administration: Lawsuit Opinions: Newspaper Clippings. Archives of Sweet Briar, sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

This folder is located on the rolling cart on the left side of the Fletcher archives. This file contains Newspaper Clippings, which speak of Sweet Briar and the integration.

Blight David W., "Quarrel Forgotten or a Revolution Remembered? Reunion and Race in the Memory of the Civil War, 1875-1913", in Blight and Simpson, eds., *Union and Emancipation* (1997).

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